Understanding Stem Cell Controversies -- Texas Hold'em Anyone?

Posted: March 2, 2011

Created: 02/03/2011 - 10:05

CIRM's Senior Officer to the Standards Working Group, Geoff Lomax, will be blogging this week from Calgary where his attending the Canadian Stem Cell Network's meeting "Stem Cell Controversies".

Today kicks off the Canadian Stem Cell Network's intensive three-day course titled Understanding Stem Cell Controversies. The focus is on emerging ethical and policy issues as the science moves towards clinical application. The course will include a conversation about the process CIRM employs to develop policies to govern the institute. But, more on that later.

First, as we were leaving sunny San Francisco, the captain mentioned it was negative 24C in Calgary. Well at least it is not humid. After a full sprint from the terminal to the taxi, the driver and I engaged in the obligatory Canadian ritual of catching up on the latest developments in the hockey world. Fortunately the Calgary Flames "walloped em" â everything was right in the universe.

The NHL was followed by the "what brings you to Calgary line." I was immediately thrust into my "stem cell basics rap" (always good to practice before a big training). My driver was particularly interested in knowing what was so unique about stem cells. He could easily learn from CIRM's Stem Cell Basics online, but since driving a web browsing is frowned on I gave him the verbal run down. Fortunately, he showed his hand by expressing his fascination about cell division, so we quickly covered progenitor and differentiated cell types. He was also curious about genes and how they relate to the splitting process. We discussed how the splitting process relates to disease.

Then came the utterly brilliant moment. My driver is a BIG poker player (loves to go the Vegas) and believes in cosmic connections. He then spent the remainder of the journey relating cell division to the odds of where the aces would fall in a game of Texas hold em. It was actually a brilliant metaphor for stochastic events in biology. It was an extraordinarily coherent explanation of how the probability of "aces showing" changes over time as players drop out. In his view, there could be some connection to stem cell division. Yes, the probability of a disease-causing mutation may change in relation to cellular changes or environmental events.

It was a wonderful example of how probabilistic events in cell biology can be related to everyday activities. For myself, it is a useful metaphor to use the next time I find myself needing to explain stem cells to non-biologists.

The moral of the story: Try your stem cell rap on your next taxi driver, it's good practice and you may learn something. And you may dispel a few popular stem cell myths while you are at it.

- Geoff Lomax

Tags: stem cell network, Lomax